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Running head: ASSESSING RISK IN EXTREMIST OFFENDERS

The Development of Structured Guidelines for Assessing Risk in Extremist Offenders

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Introduction

In England and Wales the Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG22+) has become embedded in both offender management and intelligence management systems since 2011. Its conceptual framework has been shared across law enforcement and correctional agencies to provide a common approach to identifying, managing and addressing extremism, and it has also informed approaches in the community with those in the 'pre-criminal space' within the UK government's Prevent agenda (UK Government, 2007, 2011). This paper describes this methodology, its origins and approach, and reflects a commitment to publish government-based approaches to assessing and managing extremism. The authors were at the time this work was carried out both practising forensic psychologists within the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) of England & Wales.

Before this methodology was developed, those convicted under terrorist legislation were typically considered by NOMS officials to be high risk of serious harm by virtue of their offence alone, making it difficult to deploy case management and operational resources proportionately and to manage risk effectively. This became acute following the United Kingdom's 2006 Terrorism Act that brought into custody a significant number of new offenders whose needs and risks were not fully understood. A methodology was needed to provide an empirically-based systematic and transparent approach to the assessment of risk in those convicted of, or susceptible to extremist offending; to inform proportionate risk management; increase understanding and confidence amongst front-line staff and decision-makers, and facilitate effective and targeted intervention.

When this work began there were no established methodologies for assessing risk and need in extremist offenders. Levels of trust were low between NOMS officials and the offenders, the latter typically did not trust the offender management process and some of those in NOMS who carried the risk and responsibility for making risk decisions were sceptical about trusting a new and as yet unproven methodology with this group. Negotiating the cooperation of the offenders themselves to engage in conversations was a challenging task; tape recording and transcribing interviews was not

acceptable to either prison officials, offenders or their lawyers, so the methodology could not be developed through a conventional academic approach. Some offenders refused to speak to us, some insisted that our interview notes were shared with them and signed by them as a true record and some agreed to speak but changed their mind at the last minute.

Despite these challenges, casework contact gradually grew providing the opportunity to learn about pathway influences and susceptibilities. This paper describes how the methodology was developed to be clinically sensitive, empirically grounded and ethically defensible.

Definitional and Ethical Issues

Debate regarding the definitions of extremism and terrorism continues and is outlined extensively elsewhere (Schmidt, 1984; Hoffman, 2006). A major challenge is to define these concepts without criminalising or pathologising political beliefs or dissent, especially within a democratic, pluralist society in which freedom of thought is considered to be an inviolable human right. The offenders we worked with took strong exception to being labelled 'terrorists' and we had to be very sensitive in our use of language and to our role as government officials given that they had offended against the state. Extremist offending is defined here as: *"Any offence associated with a group, cause or ideology that propagates extremist views and actions and justifies the use of violence and other illegal conduct in pursuit of its objectives."* (National Offender Management Service, 2007). This definition focuses on the criminality deployed on behalf of a group, cause or ideology and the phrase 'associated with' accommodates not only social, political and ideological motivations but also opportunistic and criminal. Our position is that in UK society individuals are free to hold any beliefs and to express dissent, but where there are democratic means to accommodate this they should not resort to breaking the law or to the use of violence.

We are aware that this definition is tautologous and potentially hegemonic coming from state officials in response to a threat to national security and in the absence of any definition of 'extremist views and actions'. We therefore distinguish the features of extremist thinking from non-extremist thinking in relation to the concept of cognitive integrative complexity (Suedfeld, Tetlock & Streufert, 1992; Liht & Savage, 1992; Savage & Liht, 2008). Extremist views or ideologies are characterised by simplistic, reductionist, bi-polar thinking (them and us; persecutors and persecuted; worthy and unworthy) which pre-empt argument, are emotionally charged and appeal to the part of our brains that mediate fight or flight in response to threat. They are characterised by low integrative complexity in that they do not accommodate or integrate multiple perspectives; a mind-set which analysis suggests is more likely to lead to conflict and violence in both state and non-state actors (Guttieri, Wallace & Suedfeld, 1995; Suedfeld & Bluck, 1988). These similarities in the nature and character of extremist thinking - regardless of their specific or unique content - are consistent with the commonalities Bjorgo and Horgan, (2009) have identified in right wing and Al-Qaeda (AQ) influenced extremist pathways and underlies NOMS approach of treating extremist offenders as a single group for assessment and management purposes.

Another contested term is *radicalisation*. At the time that this work was undertaken we were aware that it lacked rigour as it referred to both a process and an outcome, neither of which were a necessary precursor to extremist offending. Neither did it apply to the significant proportion of extremist offenders with a criminal background whose motivation was essentially opportunistic. It is self-evident that many individuals share extreme beliefs (are 'radicalised') but have no intention of carrying out an act of terrorism, and that is possible for someone who has carried out a terrorist act to desist from violence without relinquishing their ideology or cause. The ERG methodology avoids the use of this word, an approach that has been vindicated by recent academic criticism ("Sageman Interview", 2013; "Everything you've been told about radicalization is wrong", 2014).

We use instead the terms *Engagement* to describe the process by which individuals become involved with or identify with an extremist group, cause or ideology, and *Intent* to describe the mind-set associated with a readiness to carry out or contribute to an extremist offence. In addition we consider the offenders' *Capability* to carry out an act of terrorism, producing a three dimensional model. Those convicted under terrorist legislation are mostly convicted for offences that fall short of an act of violent terrorism. Some have a clear intent to offend that can be deduced from their actions; others are clearly engaged with a group, cause or ideology but do not intend to contribute to or carry out an act of terrorism. This is an important distinction to make in assessing risk of harm, and the degree of *engagement* and *intent* have become crucial in allowing us to make sense of past offending and make judgements about possible future offending. Changes in *engagement* and *intent* may be expressed in terms of *disengagement* (the opposite of engagement) and/or *desistance* (the opposite of intent).

The Development of the ERG Methodology

Initially we were wary of using risk assessment protocols developed for criminal violence for those whose motivation was apparently political (Roberts & Horgan, 2003; Dernevik, Beck, Grann, Hogue & McGuire, 2009; Gudjonsson, 2009) though Roberts and Horgan (2003) have asserted that "*effective processes for assessing risk of extremist offending do not appear different to those used for assessing other types of offending*" as long as a causal relationship between putative risk factors and offending is not assumed. The use of structured professional guidelines has subsequently been recommended by Monahan (2012) in his review of which of the approaches for assessing 'common violence' might legitimately be applied to violent terrorists. This approach was informed by a small advisory group of international experts in assessing risk of serious offending, or in extremism and terrorism who were assembled to oversee our work (Including Professors Stephen Hart, David Cook, Andrew Silke, Caroline Logan, Hazel Kemshall, Jackie Bates-Gaston and Karl Roberts). They suggested beginning

with individual case formulation based on functional analysis of individual offenders, given the lack of an existing knowledge base (Roberts & Horgan, 2003; Dernevik et al., 2009). This approach is commonly used in forensic and clinical settings for the assessment of problematic clinical presentations, and is endorsed in the wider risk assessment literature (Tarrier & Calam, 2012; Lewis & Doyle, 2010; Logan & Johnstone, 2012). It makes no assumptions about the etiology of behaviour but simply identifies what needs the behaviour is meeting for the individual. The advisory group suggested that these needs from the accounts of individual offenders, evidenced also where possible from the wider terrorist literature, should then be collated into a set of factors for assessors to consider within future case formulations, producing a set of structured professional guidelines. Various members of the advisory group continued to oversee this work as it developed, mainly by means of individual consultation. They commented on early drafts of the SRG and on its evaluation and provided formal feedback of the SRG revision that produced the final ERG (see later).

Despite the necessity of assessing individual offenders we were aware of the common risk assessment error of attributing risk solely to factors within the individual and of overlooking the importance of the environment (Monahan, 1995). The ERG necessarily focuses on the individual, but it also identifies the role of families and friends in providing support for offending, of groups in exerting influence or control over the individual, of transitional periods that provide a cognitive opening for potential engagement and of access to networks that can provide, for example, the training and funding to realise a terrorist offence. In addition political context provides both the vehicle and the opportunity for the offending (Hoffman, 2006). Professor Stephen Hart – in-line with the thinking behind the MLG - specifically advised that we should include this as it was a unique feature of extremist offending. This advice was built into the practice guidance as a contextual influence to be referenced in the assessment report but it was not included as a factor in its own right, which was perhaps an omission.

Pathways into Extremist Offending

Casework with extremist offenders indicated that for those without a criminal background a period of conditioning or grooming was typically required in order for them to overcome their inhibitions about breaking the law, a process Roberts and Horgan refers to as “socialisation into terrorism” (Roberts & Horgan, 2003). This process alters the balance of push and pull factors in favour of engagement with a group, cause or ideology. At some point those who completed the pathway crossed a threshold between engagement and intent. In order to make sense of how this may happen we consulted Ajzen and Fishbein’s (2005) Theory of Reasoned Action, derived from 35 years of experimental research. This proposes that action follows intention and is the product of behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs that determine ‘attitudes’, ‘subjective norm’ and ‘perceived behavioural control’ respectively. Put simply, the motivation to act translates into an intention to act when the individual has a positive attitude towards it, when it is anticipated that it will bring social approval and where they believe they have the capability to carry it out.

Applying this theory to the threshold between engagement and intent, for an individual to positively contemplate carrying out an act of terrorism a major shift in subjective norm seems necessary to change a normative belief that terrorism is abhorrent to an extremist belief that it is legitimate or even necessary, promising not only personal reward but social approval. For an individual to arrive at this position he or she not only has to overcome their inhibitions against terrorist offending and accomplish a major attitude shift, but also has to encounter the political and social circumstances that provide the vehicle and the opportunity for this to be accomplished. The Theory of Reasoned Action not only helps to clarify the role of attitudes, beliefs and intention, but also accommodates the widespread finding that those who commit such offences are generally not suffering from any defect of reason and that their behaviour is the product of strategic choice (Crenshaw, 1998), notwithstanding that their attitudes and beliefs may have been conditioned or groomed to be far from normative.

Intent factors represent the end point of Roberts and Horgan's socialisation into terrorism. Those who have arrived at this point by such a route typically have the following features: they over-identify with an ideology, group or cause to the extent that they have lost their personal identity and agency; they have accepted a single narrative explanation of world events; they have adopted polarised thinking that divides the world into persecutors (them) and persecuted (us); they have made a moral judgement about the out-group as unworthy in contrast to the righteousness of the in-group and acquired attitudes that justify violence in pursuit of their noble cause, telling themselves that the end justifies the means. They have engaged their emotional brains and immersed themselves in stories of heroism, honour and gallantry. This mind-set corresponds with a low level of 'integrative complexity' (Suedfeld, Tetlock & Streufert, 1992) as described above. Psychologically a collective identity displaces individual identity with its associated inhibitions against violence (Schwartz, Dunkel & Waterman, 2009).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline in detail other theories that may explain the mechanisms whereby individuals become identified with extremist groups, causes or ideologies, how certain personality traits may find expression in the extremist identity and lifestyle or how groups exert their influence. However, promising avenues include identity theory (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1993; Schwartz et al., 2009) authoritarian personality theory (Altemeyer, 2004) and social psychological theories of group influence and prejudice (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Brewer & Hewstone, 2004).

A Criminal Pathway

Over time further casework identified cases that did not accord with the theory that all extremist offenders were socialised into committing extremist offences. Several convicted AQ influenced offenders had a history of violent offending and a seemingly fragile identification with ideology. They held criminal attitudes supportive of violence and two had carried out acts of serious violence in

custody. Their involvement appeared to be opportunistic and self-serving and they did not share the same belief system or religiosity as other AQ influenced offenders. Assessment of these individuals identified a high level of social dominance, aggression, intimidation and exploitation of others through fear, as well as narcissism and sensation seeking, suggesting that they were motivated by the exercise of power and control rather than 'noble cause'. Others whose motivation was political and moral were often disparaging of them, recognising that their motivation and values were at odds with their own.

The finding that some with criminal capability had deployed their skills to assist extremists despite having little interest in their cause resulted in the inclusion of opportunistic motivation as an alternative to political/moral motivation as an engagement factor, and the addition of criminal history as a further capability factor. The implication is that there may be more than a single linear pathway into extremism; one that is essentially political that progresses through engagement to intent and another that is essentially criminal progressing from a pre-existing level of intent and capability to include an opportunistic and fragile level of engagement.

The First Structured Risk Guidance

The first Structured Risk Guidance (SRG) was developed in 2009 from early casework with approximately 20 convicted extremist offenders who were prepared to speak with us about their offending. In time our findings were cross referenced against those from an independent researcher and youth leader commissioned by London Probation to identify influences in the backgrounds of another 12 offenders convicted under the Terrorist Act and on licence in the community (Karmani, 2009). From these two independent sources there was a significant convergence of findings that we were able to cross-reference against government commissioned reviews of the literature on terrorist offending. Twenty-one features were identified as common pathway influences that were also endorsed in the literature as seemingly significant. These were collated into formal guidelines for

preparing individual formulations of risk and need. A range of staff disciplines were provided with a day's training in the guidelines, following which the SRG was piloted in custody and the community.

*Insert Figure 1 here**

From a structured interview that explored these 21 factors, trained assessors were required to assess risk in terms of four dimensions: *Beliefs, Motivation, Intent* and *Capability*. These were intended to capture the areas that were relevant to the degree of commitment to an extremist ideology, group or cause, seriousness of harm and the likelihood of a future extremist offence. Trained multi-disciplinary staff from the same establishments were asked - where possible - to complete the assessments together to create a shared formulation.

An independent evaluation in 2010 by the National Centre for Social Research focussed on the content, delivery and implementation of the SRG (Webster, Kerr & Tompkins, in MOJ press). It included interviews with stakeholders, assessors and offenders in both prisons and probation sites. Assessors indicated that the SRG provided procedural clarity, improved partnership working and increased their professional competence, confidence and sense of legitimacy in their role. Others said they would like further guidance on how the relatively generic needs identified by the 21 factors informed the assessment of risk of serious harm. In addition, the shared formulation approach was considered less efficient and effective than when assessments had been completed by a lead assessor (usually a psychologist) but who consulted other staff for their opinions and information. Offenders reported that the process improved their perceptions of staff and increased their willingness to engage with them and with the regime, affirming its value in establishing communication and building trust between those who had offended against the state and those who represented its authority.

Revisions to the SRG streamlined the factors and added in some others, clarified the stages of assessment and provided further practice guidance. By this time, casework experience with extremist offenders had grown and more clarity was emerging about common pathway influences

and failures of protection. It became increasingly evident that the susceptibilities were generic across different causes and ideologies, associated broadly with grievance, threat, identity and status issues, facilitated by a cognitive opening often associated with a transitional period in the individual's life. Also important was the absence of other sources of self-efficacy, security, identity and status that might have protected against their involvement, emphasising the importance of protective factors.

Feelings of grievance and injustice were emerging as the most frequent common denominator. Emotional resilience and problems with relationships remained relevant but were captured by other vulnerabilities including mental health and transitional periods, some of which were associated with relationship breakdown. A complex of features were emerging from assessment that were associated with criminality: dominance, risk taking/sensation seeking (need for excitement), attitudes that justified offending and criminal capability. SRG factors 7 and 18 were therefore recast as ERG factors 7 and 9, capturing the distinction between political and opportunistic motivation. In addition the work of Altemeyer, 2004 in the USA informed the features of authoritarian dominant and submissive personalities that were captured within a *need for status and/or dominance* and *susceptibility to indoctrination* respectively (ERG factors 4, 6 and 7).

SRG Factor 17 was broken down further in response to the unexpected finding that offenders differed considerably in what they wanted to achieve and what they would do to achieve it. In France for example, those in custody for extremist offences, mainly of Moroccan heritage, typically wished to establish Islamic government in their host country and were very antagonistic to what they perceived as this country's racist policies (Khosrokhavar, 2006). In the UK none of the British AQ influenced offenders we spoke to wanted to establish Islamic government in the UK. On the whole they retained an affection for their country and for the freedoms and respect they were afforded here. Their goals were to alleviate the suffering of Muslims elsewhere and to express their antagonism to British and American foreign policy in Muslim countries. Their end objectives

therefore were not necessarily harmful, though what they were prepared to do to achieve them was, in varying degrees. In contrast the objectives of those with extreme right wing beliefs were to forcibly repatriate those from a non-white ethnic background or to eliminate them in a final 'holy war'. This became an important distinction to make in terms of risk assessment: who did the offender wish to harm, on what scale and to what end? These areas are captured by ERG Intent factors 5 and 6.

*Insert Figure 2 here**

A Dimensional Model

In the ERG, the factors have been brigaded under three dimensions of *Engagement*, *Intent* and *Capability* that clarifies their relationship to risk as well as to need. Engagement replaced *Beliefs* and *Motivation* from the SRG. Engagement was a term emerging in the literature that reflected a commitment to ideology, group or cause, and feedback from assessors was that relevant beliefs could be adequately captured by the engagement factors. The three dimensions of the ERG are not derived therefore from statistical analysis but from a conceptual understanding of the functional distinction between *engagement* and *intent* and the self-evident relevance of *capability* to extremist offending.

In line with Ajzen and Fishbein's (2005) theory of reasoned action we separated the original SRG factors that accounted for the individual's engagement with ideology or cause from those associated with a readiness to offend; the former constituting '*engagement*' factors and the latter constituting '*intent*' factors. This separation was broadly endorsed within two national exercises in which a total of 35 offender managers supervising extremist offenders were asked to place the original SRG factors along a pathway either side of a threshold that represented readiness to offend.

The first dimension therefore concerns the process of *engagement* and includes the factors that motivate an individual to engage with a group, cause or ideology. The second concerns the degree of *intent* or readiness to offend associated with the individual mind-set, including what they would do and to what end. The third concerns the individual's *capability* of carrying out an act of terrorism.

The dimension of *capability* emerged from the finding that many terrorist offences had failed or been sub-lethal in their impact due to the offenders' lack of capability to carry them out. This could take the form of a lack of personal resource such as finance, knowledge, skill or resilience, or a lack of access to resources for terrorism such as social capital or networking ability. Aspects of *capability* can also provide information about *intent* where individuals had clearly developed a capability for terrorism through, for example, amassing materials for bomb making or reconnoitring possible terrorist sites. Experience suggests that *capability* is perhaps the most difficult dimension to assess and requires clarity over what level of capability is of concern. The killing of an off-duty British soldier in Woolwich, London in 2013 showed that individuals do not need advanced capability and resources to commit an act that has significant impact. However, for all its challenges it remains an important dimension to consider in assessing the potential nature and lethality of an extremist offence.

Guidance helps assessors to consider the role and function a particular factor may play in contributing to an individual's offending. Not all will be relevant to every offender and factors may play various or multiple roles. For example family or friends may either encourage or discourage involvement depending on whether they share sympathy for the ideology. Mental health may exert a pathway influence in multiple ways, or not at all. The extremist identity can meet needs for status, empowerment and revenge in those with narcissistic, paranoid or anti-social personality traits, and disinhibition can be associated with callousness, lack of empathy or a sense of entitlement. The ERG is careful not to assume the function or role that factors or circumstances play in the offending even though their typical role is described in the accompanying guidance. This feature distinguishes the

ERG from approaches that assign a score for each factor that builds into a total score for each domain. Within the ERG items are not scored as their role is qualitative, not summative; more factors do not equate with a higher level of engagement, the combination of factors simply tell the risk 'story'.

Factors and dimensions are dynamic and subject to change over time (with the exception of criminal history). Bjorgo and Horgan (2009) identify that engagement depends on a dynamic balance of push and pull factors and McCauley and Segal (1989) point out that an extremist is either becoming engaged, being engaged or in the process of disengaging. The assessment is therefore designed to measure changes in *engagement, intent and capability* and the implications for *disengagement* and/or *desistance* over time. Assessment of the presence and role of protective factors on each of these dimensions also ensures that positive changes are reflected over time. These identify the circumstances or influences that may counter the influence of risk factors. Their importance is endorsed in the terrorist literature (Hoffman, 2006; Hogan, 2009; Jacobsen, 2010) and they are commonly included in risk assessment protocols. This focus on risks, needs and protective factors as targets for intervention or management are distinctive features that allows decision makers to systematically consider how changes in individual susceptibilities and circumstances may reduce as well as increase future risk.

Conceptualising risk in terms of three dimensions therefore accommodates the apparent disconnect between engagement and intent, identifies the psychological hooks that can be targets for change, underscores the central importance of behavioural intent for future risk and provides a framework for making risk judgements and developing risk management strategies. As the three dimensions are essentially dynamic the assessment can be repeated within annual sentence plan reviews and parole reviews in order to provide an updated assessment of risk and need.

Completing the ERG 22+

Rather than work through the list of factors assessors consider four questions that broadly structure their interviews and analysis. These are: 1) What contextual circumstances seem to have contributed (or could contribute) to their offending? 2) What personal attributes (needs, susceptibilities) seem to have contributed (or could contribute) to their offending? 3) What did the person get out of (or could get out of) their offending? 4) What circumstances or attributes could protect them from offending in the future? The 22 ERG factors are consulted for their relevance, and the + suffix accommodates any other factor/s that appears relevant. Case formulation allows for the possibility that other factors not previously identified may emerge as significant in the individual case, and ensures they are not overlooked, and that assessment is individualised. It also allows the ERG to adapt as the evidence base develops. In the practice guidance assessors are provided with a description of the factor, examples of its presence or absence, and suggested protective factors. A record form is provided to note the presence and significance of relevant factors and how they may impact on risk. Practice guidance also includes the rationale for the role of each factor and the evidence for it from both the wider literature and from casework.

Assessors are asked to use their judgement to consider the role these factors played in the offence and could play in the future, how they map on to the three dimensions of *engagement*, *intent* and *capability* and what influences may protect individuals from being drawn into future offending. Case formulation is not simply a 'tick-box' approach, but requires careful analysis of the individual push and pull factors and the context of the offending, to build credible hypotheses about risk and need. Conclusions are then drawn from this analysis to inform risk decisions and risk management strategies within a written report.

Features of the ERG 22+

The ERG is a manualised assessment consistent with other contemporary methodologies that assess risk of offending, such as the recently revised Historical, Clinical & Risk Management -20 (HCR-20 Version 3) for violent offenders (Douglas, Hart, Webster, & Belfrage, 2013), or the Risk of Sexual Violence Protocol (RSVP) for sexual offenders (Hart, Kropp & Laws, 2003). Both the HCR-20 and RSVP are internationally evidence-based structured risk guidelines that assess the historical and clinical factors empirically linked with non-sexual and sexual violence respectively, alongside factors that concern risk management. These inform conclusions about the likelihood, imminence and nature of future violence and probable victims, and how this risk may be effectively managed. Like these guidelines, the ERG is manualised and includes features such as an overview of its applications and limitations; administration procedures; descriptions and rationale for its risk and protective factors, and academic references.

The ERG is not as yet informed by an equivalent evidence base primarily because of the paucity of equivalent research into factors underlying extremist offending. Assumptions are avoided about the genesis of extremist violence and the methodology is intended to capture the learning from casework as it develops. The ERG when it was formally adopted in 2011 was based on empirical data from the offence accounts of upwards of 40 convicted extremist offenders (approximately 30% of the total population in custody or under licence in NOMS at this time) alongside case information from the wider literature and research commissioned under the UK government Prevent initiative (Home Office, 2011). The factors are also grounded in mainstream psychological theories. The ERG is only completed by qualified forensic psychologists or probation officers who are experienced in complex risk assessment and who have completed ERG specific training over two days, which includes applying the assessment to practice cases. Trainees are licensed to use the guidelines and access is restricted to those who are trained in order to prevent their use by anyone who does not appreciate their provenance and limitations.

The Relationship between the ERG and Other Tools for Assessing Violent Extremism

When this methodology was first developed in 2009 there was only one other risk framework in development for the assessment of extremist offenders, and no outcome studies that could inform an actuarial approach because of the small numbers involved and the lack of re-conviction data. The developer of the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment, now in its second version (VERA 2) consulted us about whether we could develop a single framework in collaboration (Pressman, 2009; Pressman & Flockton, 2012), but we came to recognise that the goals and purpose of our assessments were different. The ERG had to accommodate those convicted of extremist offences that fell short of extremist violence, in line with UK legislation which set the bar lower than other jurisdictions. Indeed factors in the VERA 2 such as 'seeker, consumer, developer of extremist materials' constitute offences in themselves in the UK. In addition, our work needed to identify the dynamic needs and susceptibilities that might become the target for intervention or management, be sensitive to change over time, and encompass extremist offenders as a generic group. To achieve this, the ERG adopts a case formulation approach in which assessors consider not only the presence of a factor but also its role in the offence (including those that may be idiosyncratic to the individual) to inform a nuanced conclusion about risk and protection; whereas the VERA 2 typically focuses on the presence of factors alone to inform an overall risk decision.

The VERA 2 was not intended as a correctional tool but simply as a means to assess the risk of violent extremism. For our purposes we needed to determine the actual engagement influences for extremist offenders in the UK at this time in order to be confident that we understood their pathways and objectives. At this point we had already been surprised that many of our assumptions about motivation and goals had been challenged. The ERG is therefore informed by casework with UK convicted terrorists, cross referenced to the literature where this provides corroboration, but essentially evidenced by the offenders themselves, whereas the VERA 2 is a conceptual formulation of 31 items grouped into five categories informed largely by the literature (Beliefs and Attitudes;

Context and Intent; History and Capability; Commitment and Motivation and Protective items).

However, the VERA 2 is similar to the ERG in its general approach (applying structured professional judgement); some dimensions (intent and capability), some factors (e.g. grievance, dehumanisation, indoctrination), and in its focus on protective factors and standards for administration.

These similarities are shared with the Multi-Level Guidelines (MLG), a set of structured professional guidelines to assess group based violence that aspires to include organised crime, gangs, freeman sovereign (anti-government) citizens, terrorism and honour based violence (Cook, Hart and Kropp 2014). The MLG groups risk factors from the literature within a nested ecological model with Individual, Individual-Group, Group and Group-Societal domains. Like the VERA 2 that is specifically intended to assess violence in the context of extremism, the MLG is specifically intended to assess violence in the context of groups, and their respective factors are informed by systematic searches of the literature by these terms. In contrast, the ERG is concerned to capture the pathway influences (especially motivating factors) in those convicted of extremist offences in order to understand how they became engaged and to facilitate their dis-engagement or desistance. It is specifically concerned to assess their intentions, both in terms of what they would have done had they not been apprehended, and to what end, and their capability of carrying it out.

In contrast to both the VERA 2 and the MLG, in the ERG there are no factors that refer directly to violence. Most of those convicted of terrorist offences in the UK have no history of violence, though some do. Their convictions are rarely for violent offences but essentially for contributing to, supporting or plotting extremist offences. In terms of administration, the MLG advocates that case formulation is completed by a group, whereas the ERG is now completed by a single assessor following the feedback from the SRG pilot that found this to be problematic in our particular setting. Again, it is not surprising that there are significant overlaps between the ERG and MLG given that Professor Stephen Hart was both part of the expert group for the development of the ERG and one of the authors of the MLG.

However, it is the case that the 'lab environment' and academic context in which the VERA 2 and MLG respectively were developed has supported a more systematic and academic approach. The developer of the MLG built in an assessment of interrater reliability within the pilot training, an opportunity that we missed and that is only now being corrected through a dedicated interrater reliability study.

The Utility of the ERG

In addition to the general endorsement of the utility of the pilot version of the ERG, (See Webster, Kerr & Tompkins, in MOJ press), the final version was peer-reviewed within NOMS and by two of the international experts in risk assessment from the original advisory group, Professors Stephen Hart (Simon Fraser University, Canada) and David Cook (Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland). Their feedback was that the guidelines would serve both to educate staff and to guide practice as well as stimulate further work in the field. The evidence base was considered to be well summarized and the best available at this time; the guidelines were explicit and well organized; the focus consistently practical; with appropriate emphasis on assessors needing to be organized, systematic, thorough, experienced, trained, and free of assumptions. The ERG was considered to be equal or superior to existing alternatives at the time. Following approval, the SRG was formally renamed the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG) 22+ in 2011 and mainstreamed for use across NOMS.

Since this time the ERG has become embedded within the National Offender Management Service and is used to inform decisions about sentence planning, relocation, intervention, re-integration, parole, release, recall, licence conditions and supervision. All convicted extremist offenders, a total of over 150 individuals from a range of extremist affiliations have now been assessed (including those associated with far-right, nationalist-separatist and animal rights groups). The ERG has played a critical role in informing decisions that concern convicted extremist offenders across NOMS, including how they are managed, supervised and monitored; what interventions they complete,

whether these have impacted on risk, and whether and how they should be located, relocated, released and reintegrated into society, or recalled into custody.

The ERG has also been adapted to create the Extremism Risk Screen (ERS), a shortened version of the ERG which asks key questions under the three headings of engagement, intent and capability. The ERS is designed to assist prison and probation officials assess information about an offender's possible involvement or interest in extremist groups, causes or ideas. This is used with offenders with no previous convictions for extremist offences. It directs the attention of security staff, police liaison officers and offender managers to the dimensions that are deemed to bear on risk. A shared discussion allows them to evaluate the credibility of concerns and decide whether and how to intervene; one possible outcome being the completion of a full ERG assessment to provide a more complete picture.

The Home Office Channel project that operates in the community to support and intervene with those vulnerable to extremism uses the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (UK Government 2012)¹ derived from the ERG to assess vulnerability and monitor the impact of interventions. Confidence in its use is associated with the fact that it is derived from the actual pathway experiences of the 'true positives' or those who have been convicted of terrorist offences.

The ERG allows those working in counter-terrorism from different agencies to use a common language that allows focused discussion and consistent decision making across custody and the community. Important decisions have to be made about extremist offenders on a daily basis and the ERG provides a systematic, transparent and accountable framework that structures that and supports defensible decision making.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118187/vul-assessment.pdf

The Validity of the ERG

There is evidence from both experience and evaluation that the ERG has both face and content validity (Webster, Kerr & Tompkins, in MOJ press). There is also a degree of convergent validity in the overlap between some of the ERG factors and those within the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment Version 2 (VERA 2) and the Multi-Level Guidelines (MLG) for group-based violence, though this is not surprising given that all have been informed directly or indirectly by a common literature and mutual consultation. The widespread use of the ERG demonstrates its face validity and utility but cannot be taken as a substitute for predictive validity which many consider to be the gold standard for forensic instruments. This is commonly derived from regression analysis of reconviction data, but this is difficult with this offender group for a number of reasons. Re-offending may be prevented by the level of monitoring, surveillance, licence restrictions and ready recall that currently accompanies their release. Those convicted may well withdraw from a front line role once they have become known to police and security services and remain undetected although still involved. Many of the more serious extremist offenders are serving very long minimum terms, and those who carried out suicide bombings did not survive their offence. Those with a criminal history will be more likely to re-offend, though not necessarily commit extremist offences, and current manifestations of extremism may spontaneously diminish as the political climate changes.

Negligible extremism re-offending rates will require softer outcomes for analysis that may shed less light on the predictive power of the methodology.. Given these issues, research that helps identify how the ERG contributes to decision making that maintains desistance may be a more fruitful and realistic objective than the sole pursuit of predictive validity.

NOMS is currently exploring from completed ERG assessments which factors are generic and which specific to different types of extremist offending, and what may protect against them. An interrater reliability study is also being completed. As with other risk and need instruments, ongoing studies

will develop our understanding of this area of risk and of the performance of the instrument, and result in adaptations to the ERG over time.

On the plus side, the individual factors have been derived from the engagement pathways of the 'true positives', and to that extent are empirically grounded. The role of individual factors and dimensions are also underpinned by mainstream psychological knowledge that explains the importance of personal and social identity, status, the role of groups, the appeal of the extremist identity to particular personality traits, the role of integrative complexity in understanding the mind-set of intent and how a combination of motivation, attitudes, and self-efficacy can reach a tipping point in the decision to take action. The terrorist literature has also been a constant touchstone and source of evidence for each development in the methodology. This all provides a sound foundation for further validity studies.

The Limitations of the ERG

The current lack of demonstrated reliability and validity remain the main limitations of the ERG at this time. It remains essentially a qualitative tool that requires a level of professional judgement and experience to be used effectively.

The ERG requires assessors to have a level of political awareness in the area of extremism in question. Without regular use, which is difficult with relatively few extremist offenders, they have limited opportunity to gain this knowledge and maintain their expertise, such that political, cultural and social context, together with protective factors can potentially slip from the analysis.

Another possible limitation is that it was constructed to primarily capture the particular pathway influences and objectives of British AQ influenced extremist offenders during the period of the Afghan and Iraqi wars. It has already been established that they differed in objectives from their French counterparts, though the inclusion of a specific factor concerning objectives should ensure

that changes in objectives are captured as they evolve. In the UK the ERG has been found to support assessment with extreme right wing offenders, animal rights activists, female extremists and gang members who's offending is based on joint enterprise. It is likely therefore to continue to prove useful in assessing manifestations of extremism elsewhere as the geo-political situation evolves.

Conclusion

The ERG is work in progress. This paper has described its origins in the analysis of the true positives - those convicted of terrorist offences in the UK, which is perhaps both a strength and a weakness. It is the only approach, to our knowledge, that has derived such a methodology from direct contact with those convicted of terrorist offences as well as the wider literature. The circumstances of its development however may have detracted from its academic credentials in that it was not based on recorded and transcribed interviews, systematically analysed, or a transparent and replicable literature review conducted specifically for this purpose. We came to this work as practitioners with a strong imperative to develop products for correctional and managerial purposes. Now that the ERG dimensional model has become embedded in NOMS and a significant number of assessments have been completed, efforts are being made to further analyse its performance and to validate it more systematically.

There remain important questions to be explored, most notably around reliability and validity, but in the meantime the ERG provides a systematic, transparent and accessible framework for engaging, assessing and managing extremist offenders and those vulnerable to engagement, in prison and the community. Such an approach is crucial in this field where public protection is a primary consideration and decision making needs to be both transparent and defensible.

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Figure 1: SRG Factors

- 1. Lack of emotional resilience**
- 2. Problems with Relationships**
- 3. Need to feel important, valued or special**
- 4. Need for identity, meaning and belonging**
- 5. Feelings of threat and insecurity**
- 6. Sensitivity to perceived injustice**
- 7. Idealism and political naivety**
- 8. Susceptibility to charismatic individuals**
- 9. Susceptibility to indoctrination**
- 10. Susceptibility to group influence and control**
- 11. The family and/or community support extremist offending**
- 12. Over-identification with a cause**
- 13. Attitudes that justify offending**
- 14. 'Us and Them Thinking'**
- 15. Need for stimulation and excitement**
- 16. Desire to experience themselves as a hero, soldier or person of honour**
- 17. Intent to bring about harmful regime change**
- 18. Opportunistic involvement**
- 19. Individual knowledge, skills and competencies to commit extremist offences**
- 20. Access to networks, funding and equipment to commit extremist offences**
- 21. Diagnosis of Mental Illness & Personality Disorder**
- Any Other Area Relevant to Risk**

Figure 2: ERG 22+ Dimensions and Factors

Engagement

1. Need to redress injustice and express grievance
2. Need to defend against threat
3. Need for identity, meaning, belonging
4. Need for status
5. Need for excitement, comradeship or adventure
6. Need for dominance
7. Susceptibility to indoctrination
8. Political/moral motivation
9. Opportunistic involvement
10. Family or friends support extremist offending
11. Transitional periods
12. Group influence and control
13. Mental health

Intent

1. Over-identification with a group or cause
2. Us and Them thinking
3. Dehumanisation of the enemy
4. Attitudes that justify offending
5. Harmful means to an end
6. Harmful end objectives

Capability

1. Individual knowledge, skills and competencies
2. Access to networks, funding and equipment
3. Criminal history
- + Any other factor